

Advising on ‘Alexander’

Robin Lane Fox

*In this interview for **Omnibus**, Robin Lane Fox recounts his experience as historical adviser to Oliver Stone’s Alexander.*

For nearly three years, I have been Oliver Stone’s historical adviser. I have to say that Oliver had more knowledge of history than I had of films before we began. I have not seen more than half a dozen films in the past ten years, and my favourites are old ones, *Ninotchka* (1938) and, of course, *Casablanca*. But I now have an inside view which is, I think, unique.

When Harvard classicist, Kathleen Coleman, gave expert advice to the makers of *Gladiator*, she concluded that the hope of a classicist influencing a Hollywood film about the ancient world was ‘a fantasy’. My experience has been very different, for three reasons. Unlike *Gladiator*, Alexander portrays historical people. Its central characters are Alexander and the elderly Ptolemy. Ronald Syme, the famous Roman historian, once proposed that this sort of treatment should be characterized as ‘fictional history’. By contrast, Syme claimed, a story with fictional characters set in the past is ‘historical fiction’. I certainly do not agree with Syme’s edgy demarcation. For me (and for Oliver Stone), both types of story are historical fiction, but the first type, using real people, benefits from historical underpinning. Usually, history is so much more interesting than a film-maker’s corny projection of an illusory ‘past’. Oliver Stone agreed, and as his film, unlike *Gladiator*, had a historical cast, a historian had a particular relevance.

There was also an openness to ideas in Oliver himself. In March 2002, when I told an American history-colleague that I was going to talk with Oliver Stone about the history of Alexander, he told me that it would be like ‘having lunch with Satan’. I do not think he meant Stone’s much-discussed narcotic past, a feature in his recent *Natural Born Killers*. What he meant was that Stone was believed to have manipulated historical facts in his immensely popular films on JFK and Nixon.

Working for Satan

Like the poet John Milton, I now have a very soft spot for ‘Satan’. From the top downwards, Oliver and his team were concerned to use history and historical reference as their springboard. Throughout they shared a respect for, and fascination with, the ancient world. The film first took shape in 1989 after a submission from German-based producer, Thomas Schuehly, an associate of the great Fassbinder. It became a reality through the courage and persistence of its financier and producer, Moritz Borman. Both of them had studied classics (including Latin unseens) as a compulsory part of their schooling in Catholic south Germany. On set in Thailand the film’s first foreign distributor, Paul Rassam of Pathé, quoted Cicero’s *Catilinarians* to me in Latin while thirty war-elephants prepared to charge at us through man-made jungle. In preparation for his role, Colin Farrell had withdrawn to a caravan in California and read Homer and Sophocles in translation in order to have more of a grasp of Alexander’s own education. In twenty years’ time, will readers of *Omnibus* be contributing in the same spirit to a film, say, on Alcibiades? The global world has so many other mythologies nowadays, and in the film-going ‘Pacific world’ of western America and the Far East, ‘Eastern’ stories are increasingly prominent. None of Alexander’s team would claim to be a classicist, but they had a constant respect for their subject. It often

began from the schooling which *Omnibus* values, and then of course the extraordinary power of our subject took over...

Before meeting Oliver Stone, I had thought what the terms for my advising should be. Millions of dollars? A share in the box-office takings? I have seen so many of these ‘Alexander projects’ come and go that I thought, instead, of what would give me most pleasure. My terms have become notorious: a place in the front ten of every cavalry charge involving the Macedonian cavalry and a credit for my name, prefaced by the words ‘and introducing’. Even Oliver was surprised. ‘And introducing’ involves legal issues, and I am certainly not an actor: the BBC gave it to me instead, in the documentary which they made about my role on horseback. But Oliver gave me the cavalry-charges, and not just in the front ten, either. For the crucial breakthrough at Gaugamela, I am in close-up as the commanding Hipparch of the main companion cavalry. All the others are trying, and failing, to overtake my chestnut Moroccan stallion, the admirable (but badly-named) *Gladiator*. *Gladiator* and I hold the ten-furlong record in the Lakhfaouna desert, Oliver’s battlefield of ‘Gaugamela’ out beyond Marrakesh.

Riding with Alexander

My bloodthirsty service on horseback meant that unlike other ‘historical advisers’, I was conveniently on set for several weeks. It also raised my credibility. Classicists do not like film-makers who disrespect their subject and make as much of a mess of our knowledge as Wolfgang Petersen made of Homer’s *Troy*. Film-makers do not like historians who delay them for the sake of their pet-theories over every single detail during what is a rapid filming of a drama, not a history-documentary. As the ‘natural born killer’ in Oliver’s cavalry, I had more of a chance to make suggestions on set. Back in Oxford, drafts of each forthcoming scene were then couriered to me for comments. While teaching pupils the sources for Ptolemy, Olympias or Alexander, I was sending back words for their namesakes to perform on camera. On other epic films, historians are usually confined to one visit to a set, and a credit thereafter. For Alexander, I faced war-elephants on horseback, broke through the Persian lines and wrote details for Philip, Alexander, Ptolemy, Aristotle and others.

Film-makers know that the ‘look’ of their film is all-important and that audiences must not be lost or bored. Oliver Stone’s questions to me were not, ‘Could this or that have happened?’ They were, ‘Did this happen?’ and when he then rearranged events or ran similar events together, he did so for reasons of space, financing or drama. He did not change them in ignorance. We all learned, not only that Colin Farrell was such a star, well up to a Macedonian-style drinking party and a big action scene, next day, in which his quick wits and personal example brought the best out of everyone. Oliver learned some more Greek history and I learned how to charge with a lance, and no stirrups, at French-speaking actors playing at being Bactrians and to continue to think about so much in Alexander’s career. I continue to see his history as one of a young man with a bigger vision, betrayed by events (and himself); he was not a proto-Stalin or a conquistador with no vision at all. Morally, we may deplore invaders and conquerors nowadays, but we also need, as historians, to understand what happened through the values, perhaps even the eyes, of Alexander and his men.

For Oliver, Alexander was always heroic, though a hero with

dark sides. If I ever hear that the Classical Association have detained him and his cast for disregarding history, I will send for Gladiator and gallop off to rescue them. If one of the prisoners is Olympias (Angelina Jolie), there will be no stopping me as I scoop her up to safety. If one is Roxane (the new superstar, Rosario Dawson), I like to think that after all we went through, there will be no stopping her, either.

Robin Lane Fox teaches ancient history at New College Oxford. When he is not on film set he writes about gardening in the Financial Times. For more on Oliver Stone's Alexander see: www.alexanderthemovie.com